

House of Lords

CHARGE OF "MASS MEDICATION" REBUTTED

"Making Up Nature's Deficiencies"

Opening a debate in the House of Lords yesterday on his motion calling attention to "the infringement of the liberty of the subject and the danger to the health of individuals, inherent in projects of mass-medication, such as the addition of chalk to flour, iodine to salt and fluorine to public water supplies,"

LORD DOUGLAS OF BARLOCH said that the battle for the liberty of the subject had to be renewed and fought in every age. "The passion to regulate the lives of others is deep-seated and hard to root out. It is most dangerous and most insidious when it arises, not from motives of personal gain, but from the desire to inflict benefit upon others."

Referring to the addition of chalk to National bread, he said: "We have thus reached a position in which, by Government order, the vast majority of the population are obliged to have chalk in their bread. And the total amount of chalk which is used for this purpose in a year is eleven thousand tons." The theory underlying its addition was that the population was not getting enough calcium in its diet. But, even granting that, did this entitle the authorities to force the public to eat more of it by putting chalk in their bread?

Referring to the use of iodine in salt he said, "the intake of iodine is obviously extremely variable as sea foods are one of its principal sources. It is quite immoral to force it upon everyone without regard to the amount they are already having. This is a negation of the art of medicine as hitherto practised. It is also a negation of the liberty of the subject." Dealing with the addition of fluoride to water, he remarked, "at one time fluorides were used as preservatives in foods but that use is now prohibited by law. So that the addition of fluoride to a public water supply must be a matter of grave public concern"

"Terribly Shocked"

LORD AMULREE trusted the House would reject the motion. The doctor was not there to cure his patient. "He is there to stop him becoming sick. That is the prime reason why we have the National Health Service now and also the prime reason why doctors exist. If, by adopting a certain number of simple measures, you can stop a certain amount of preventable disease, you are not only doing good to the patients but doing a certain amount of economic work as well."

LORD WEBB-JOHNSON was "terribly shocked" to find a Scotsman—he presumed Lord Douglas claimed some attachment to that country—adopting his present attitude, because Scotland was the native country of John Hunter and John

Hunter was the founder of scientific surgery. "Lord Douglas seems to be intent on preventing us trying the experiment. The experiment may be more frightening if it is to be applied by mass medication, but it may be that truth can only be found by that means and not by the observance of individuals. So I do beg of him to keep an open mind. I would like to protest against the suggestion that mass medication as Lord Douglas calls it, is contrary to all the ethics and traditions of the medical profession. It is not mass medication. It is the reinforcement of nature's supply in a particular district. I do object to Lord Douglas referring to adding drugs to the water supply when all that is being suggested, if it is actually being suggested as a practical proposition at the moment, is adding something in which nature has been deficient in a particular district." There were no limits to the lengths to which the opposers to a sanitary measure would go.

LORD CARRINGTON (Joint Parliamentary Secretary Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries), replying for the Government, said that the examples quoted by Lord Douglas were not medicaments as usually understood, but were rather measures to ensure that the people had in their diet a sufficiency of certain substances found essential to maintain good health or prevent disease. The addition of chalk to flour had been recommended by the Committee on Nutrition of the British Medical Association to ensure that the consumption of calcium should reach 0.8 grains per adult daily. "The danger of deficiency still exists in spite of the substantial increase in milk consumption during and since the war."

Dealing with the iodisation of salt he said that the Committee on Medical and Nutritional Problems, of the Ministry of Health, had endorsed a recommendation that preventive action against goitre should be taken on a national scale by the addition of a trace of iodine to salt used for domestic purposes. "I may say that in a number of countries where goitre is very common, salt has been iodised for a number of years and nowhere has there been any resulting harm. In fact, the experience of these and other countries is that nothing but good has resulted."

Government's Responsibility

"I do not think that Lord Douglas would suggest that, if it becomes known that certain elements which are essential to health are missing from the diet of a large number of people of this country the Government should sit back and do nothing. Nowadays we believe that the Government has a general responsibility for ensuring the health of the people."

The motion was, by leave, withdrawn.

The following bills were given formal second readings: the Brighton Corporation Bill, Mersey Docks and Harbour Board Bill, Stroudwater Navigation Bill.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner.

Further reproduction prohibited without permission.